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ABSTRACT

Beginning communication course textbooks typically discuss language theory and skills--the authors' attempts to help students learn and use language appropriate to the occasion and the audience. These discussions are usually included in public speaking and hybrid textbooks for the basic course. There is a movement in general education requirements at United States colleges and universities that identifies oral communication education as a goal to be attained in order to be considered an educated citizen. This movement raises the important issue: what level of oral fluency or literacy is needed for students to pass the basic communication course. Since these courses are included as central to a college or university's general education, communication educators need to teach students to be fluent orally. The central question is: Are students prepared with the skills necessary so that when they speak, people listen? This paper reviews sections of basic communication texts that include the discussion of language and language usage. This study summarizes the instructional literature on language usage in many popular basic communication course texts (n=13). The advantages of identifying and highlighting the skills necessary for oral communication fluency are discussed. Contains 13 references. (NKA)

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Acceptable Verbal Skills in the Basic Communication Course

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Abstract

Beginning communication course textbooks typically discuss language theory and skills. This is the authors' attempt to help students learn and use language appropriate to the occasion and the audience. These discussions are usually included in public speaking and hybrid textbooks for the basic course. In spite of these explanations, there remains great variance in what instructors accept as "appropriate" or "acceptable" language use in students' assignments -- whether speeches, groups, or interpersonal assignments.

There is a movement in general education requirements at U.S. colleges and universities that identify a goal of oral communication education to be the educated citizen. (See information from any of the college and university accrediting agencies and look at college catalogues where the goals of general education are listed.) With this goal, students are to be better prepared at participating as members of our society. This participation includes being able to articulate ideas clearly, argue coherently, and speak as an educated citizen. This movement in general education raises an important issue in communication education. The issue centers on what level of oral fluency or literacy is needed for students to pass the basic communication course.

Since these courses are included as central to a college or university's general education, communication educators need to

teach students to be fluent orally -- to sound like an educated citizen. The central question is: *Do we prepare students with the skills necessary so that when they speak, people listen.*

I spend most of this manuscript reviewing sections of basic communication texts that include the discussion of language and language usage. This study summarizes the instructional literature on language usage in many popular basic communication course texts. Whether the advice in these books is good or bad is not the focus of this paper. If students are referring to our instruction on language usage in the textbooks, then communication educators need to evaluate student assignments on the use of these specific skills in the classroom.

Since oral communication is central to general education requirements, communication educators need to make significant contributions to the development of students oral communication skills. It seems reasonable that a major element of this contribution is teaching students to be better users of our language as a result of their taking a basic communication course. Expecting college students to use college-level verbal skills seems reasonable. Preparing students to be fluent in their future personal and professional communication is a central goal to education in the basic communication course -- and the reason our courses are included in general education requirements.

The advantages of identifying and highlighting the skills necessary for oral communication fluency are discussed.

Surveying Discussions on Language Usage

The following summaries of authors' explanations of language usage in basic communication course textbooks is intended to reveal the themes consistently identified as important. They are offered without commentary because they are valuable suggestions to our students in the basic course.

S. Lucas - The Art of Public Speaking

Lucas (1998) indicated that students, in preparing their speeches, use language in the following ways:

- "USING LANGUAGE ACCURATELY: Using language accurately is as vital to a speaker as using numbers accurately is to an accountant. ... Choose words that are precise, exact, accurate. When in doubt, consult the dictionary or thesaurus to make sure you have the best words to express your ideas" (p. 267).

- "USING LANGUAGE CLEARLY: As many people have discovered, much to their dismay, it is possible to use language accurately without using it clearly. ... You can ensure this by using familiar words, by choosing concrete words over abstract words, and by eliminating verbal clutter" (p. 269).

- "USE FAMILIAR WORDS: It may seem obvious that familiar words are better than unfamiliar ones. ... You cannot go wrong by following the advice of Winston Churchill to speak in 'short, homely words of common usage'" (pp. 270-271).

- "CHOOSE CONCRETE WORDS: Concrete words refer to tangible objects -- people, places, and things. They differ from abstract words, which refer to general concepts, qualities, or attributes. ... Also, concrete words are much more likely to claim your listeners' attention" (pp. 271-272).

- "ELIMINATE CLUTTER: Cluttered speech has become a national epidemic. ... Beware of using several words where one or two will do. Avoid flabby phrases. Let your ideas emerge sharply and firmly. Above all, watch out for redundant adjectives and adverbs" (p. 273).

- "USING LANGUAGE VIVIDLY: Just as you can be accurate without being clear, so you can be both accurate and clear without being interesting. ... Dull, dreary words make for dull, dreary speeches. Bring your speeches to life by using vivid, animated language. Although there are several ways to do this, here are two of the most important -- imagery and rhythm" (p. 274).

- "USING LANGUAGE APPROPRIATELY: Language that is appropriate for some occasions may not be appropriate for others. ... Appropriateness also depends on the audience. ... Language should also be appropriate to the topic. ... No matter what the occasion, audience, or topic, language should also be appropriate to the speaker" (pp. 280-282).

- "A NOTE ON NONSEXIST LANGUAGE: Whatever your feelings about these trends, avoiding sexist language is important as a matter of accuracy in speechmaking. ... Even if you do not care

about sexist language yourself, you can be sure that almost any audience you address will contain people -- men and women alike -- who do care and who will be upset if you use it in your speech" (pp. 283-284).

R. Ross - The Speechmaking Process

Ross (1998) included this advice on language usage for the student-speaker:

- "Clearly vocabulary alone is often a sensitive matter and is capable of altering or even short-circuiting meaning" (p. 33).

- "Accurate word choice is a must for speakers to be effective" (p. 40).

- "One of the most wide-spread 'thinking' faults of student speakers is false generalization" (p. 42).

- "HELPFUL RULES: 1. The index rule reminds us to be aware of stereotypes and other forms of overgeneralizaton. 2. The 'is' problem is related to the principle of nonidentity. 3. The et cetera rule is related to the principle of 'nonallness.' 4. Dating your language. 5. Discerning presymbolic language" (p. 44).

- "VIVIDNESS: Make your language bright and colorful as well as meaningful. ... If we are not prudent, our attempts at vividness can easily turn maudlin, showy, or even destructive" (pp. 46-47).

- "FIGURES OF SPEECH: Figures of speech are metaphorical statements that can add vividness, spunk, and delight to your message" (p. 48).

- "'POLITICALLY CORRECT' LANGUAGE: 'Shooting from the lip' has killed or injured the careers of many public figures" (p. 49).

- "VERBAL OBSCENITY: This is part of the modern scene. Words can hurt us. Shockingly obscene words have a way of affecting the rationality of both those who use them and those to whom they are addressed" (p. 52).

- "ODE TO SENSITIVITY: Knowing what is appropriate and politically correct in every speaking situation is often a frustrating, but absolutely necessary effort if we are to be sensitive and effective speakers" (p. 54).

A. Koch - <u>Speaking With A Purpose</u>

Koch (1998) offered the following suggestions to the student-speaker in selecting language for a speech:

- "Use familiar words. Be assured, unless your listener understands the message, communication will not take place. Sometimes speakers are so concerned with impressing their audience with their vocabularies that they actually fail to communicate" (p. 123).

- "Use specific words. An effective way of making your ideas clear to others is to use specific language. ... Sometimes a

difficult concept can be made clear by explaining it in specific terms" (p. 123).

S. Beebe & S. Beebe - Public Speaking: An Audience-Centered Approach

Beebe and Beebe (1997) provided the following advice for the student-speakers in using language in their speeches:

- "ORAL VERSUS WRITTEN LANGUAGE STYLE: Oral style is more personal. ... oral style is less formal. Oral style is more repetitious" (pp. 257-258).

- "USE CONCRETE WORDS: A concrete word refers to an object or describes an action or characteristic in the most specific way possible. An abstract word is more general" (p. 259).

- "USE UNBIASED WORDS: Certainly a speaker whose language insults any sexual, racial, cultural, or religious group runs a great risk of committing 'societal suicide' by offending his or her audience members" (pp. 259-260).

- "USE VIVID WORDS: When searching for the right word to make your language vivid, consult a thesaurus -- a book that lists synonyms. But in searching for an alternative word, do not feel that you have to use the most obscure or unusual term to vary your description. Language that is both animated and simple can very effectively evoke an image for your listeners" (p. 261).

- "USE SIMPLE WORDS: The best language is often the simplest. Your words and sentences should be immediately

understandable to your listeners. Don't try to impress them with jargon and complicated sentences" (p. 262).

- "USE WORDS CORRECTLY: A public speech is not the place to demonstrate your lack of familiarity with English vocabulary and grammar. In fact, your effectiveness as a public speaker depends in part on your ability to use the English language correctly" (p. 263).

- "Save your stylistic devices for times during your speech when you want your audience to remember your key ideas or when you wish to capture their attention" (p. 269).

- "Short words are more forceful than long ones" (p. 269).

- "Use stylistic devices to economize" (p. 270).

J. Pearson and P. Nelson - <u>An Introduction to Human Communication: Understanding & Sharing</u>

Pearson and Nelson (1997) provided the following ideas to help student-speakers to select language for their speeches:

- "AVOID INTENTIONAL CONFUSION: We should try to increasingly sensitive to our use of empty language, ambiguities, cliches, and euphemisms" (p. 94).

- "USE DESCRIPTIVENESS: To communicate effectively with another person, it is important to ave a common understanding of an event that has occurred or of the definition of a particular phenomenon. ... For example, each of us confuses inferences -- conclusions drawn from observation -- with the actual situation

of event being observed. ... Two more kinds of descriptiveness can help improve your use of language: paraphrasing and using operational definitions" (pp. 94-95).

- "BE CONCRETE: Concreteness is any form of more specific expression" (p. 96).

J. DeVito - <u>The Elements of Public Speaking</u>

DeVito (1997) wrote about the following ideas regarding using language in a public speech:

- "CLARITY: Be economical. Don't waste words. ... Use specific terms and numbers. Notice that as we get more and more specific, we get a clearer and more detailed picture. Be specific" (p. 281)

- "Use guide phrases. Listening to a public speech is difficult work. Assist your listeners by using phrases to help them see that you are moving from one idea to another" (p. 282).

- "Use short, familiar terms. Generally, favor the short word over the long one. Favor the familiar word over the unfamiliar word. Favor the more commonly used term over the rarely used term" (p. 282).

- "Use repetition and restatement. Repetition, restatement, and internal summaries will all help make your speech clearer" (p. 282).

- "Distinguish between commonly confused words. Many words, because they are alike or are used in similar situations, are commonly confused" (p. 282).

- "Carefully assess culture-specific language. Much everyday language consists of idioms, expressions that are unique to a specific language or culture and whose meaning cannot be deduced from the individual words used" (p. 283).

- "VIVIDNESS: Use active words. Favor verbs that communicate activity rather than passivity. ... Use strong verbs. The verb is the strongest part of your sentence. Choose verbs carefully, and choose them so they accomplish a lot. ... Use figures of speech. Figures of speech help achieve vividness. ... Use imagery. Appeal to the senses, especially our visual, auditory, and tactile senses. Make us see, hear, and feel what you are talking about" (pp. 284-286).

- "APPROPRIATENESS: Speak on the appropriate level of formality. The most effective public speaking style is less formal than the written essay but more formal than conversation. ... Avoid unfamiliar terms. Avoid using terms the audience does not know. Avoid foreign and technical terms unless you are certain the audience is familiar with them. Similarly, avoid jargon unless you are sure the meanings are clear to your listeners. ... Avoid slang. Avoid offending your audience with language that embarrasses them or makes them think you have little respect for them. ... Avoid racist, sexist, and heterosexist terms. Avoid referring to culturally different

groups with terms that carry negative connotations or picturing them in stereotypical and negative terms. ... Avoid sex-role stereotyping. ... Avoid heterosexist language, language that disparages gay men and lesbians" (pp. 286-287)

- "FORCEFULNESS/POWER: Eliminate weaknesses. Delete phrases that weaken your sentences. ... Cut out any unnecessary phrases that reduce the impact of your meaning. ... Vary intensity as appropriate. Much as you can vary your voice in intensity, so too can you phrase y our ideas with different degrees of stylistic intensity. ... Avoid bromides and cliches. Bromides are sentences that are worn out because of constant usage. ... Cliches are phrases that have lost their novelty and part of their meaning through overuse (pp. 289-290).

P. Kearney and T. Plax - <u>Public Speaking In A Diverse Society</u>

Kearney and Plax (1996) offered the following suggestions to student-readers, soon to be student-speakers, about language in their speeches:

- "USE IMAGINATIVE IMAGERY: Concrete images. ... Vivid images are more easily aroused with the use of concrete language. Similes and metaphors. ... Simile and metaphor both rely on comparisons between two seemingly dissimilar things. Similes create images through the use of a direct, expressed analogy, whereas metaphors develop a picture through an implied analogy. ... Use intense, animated language. ... Moreover, vivid language

contributes a great deal to attitude and behavior change. ... Choose the active voice. Grammatical voice refers to the relationship between the subject of a sentence and the action of the verb. ... Use power words and avoid unnecessary qualifiers. Some expressions weaken and undermine a speaker's position and arguments" (pp. 350-354).

- "SPEAK TO INCLUDE, NOT ALIENATE: Use bias-free language. ... Don't mention group membership unnecessarily. ... Be inclusive and avoid making unwarranted assumptions. Don't use masculine terms as generics. Don't use feminine endings. Remember that people are people first. Watch for hidden bias" (pp. 355-358).

- "PRACTICE BEING VERBALLY IMMEDIATE: In one language strategy, speakers employ certain words to reduce the physical or psychological distance, or immediacy, between themselves and their audience" (p. 358).

- 'AVOID PROFANITY: Avoiding profanity probably goes without saying, yet speakers occasionally make the mistake of inserting a swear word, telling a dirty, ethnic, or sexist joke, or using an obscene gesture" (p. 359).

T. Gamble and M. Gamble - <u>Public Speaking In The Age Of Diversity</u>

Gamble and Gamble (1998) suggested the following in trying to help students select language for their speeches:

- "KEEP IT SIMPLE: Whenever you have the choice, you are wise to select the simplest, most familiar word available to you. Never opt to use a lengthy, multisyllabic, less familiar word when a shorter, simpler one will do -- the latter is usually more clear to your listeners, and audiences appreciate clarity" (p. 253).

- "KEEP IT CONCRETE: Using concrete rather than abstract language helps your audience members picture what you want them to. The more abstract you are, the less likely it is that your listeners will share the image you intended for them to visualize" (p. 255).

- "KEEP IT APPROPRIATE: The language you use should be appropriate to both you and your audience. Your speech should be phrased in words that suit you (words you understand and are comfortable with), and words your audience will understand, accept, and respond to" (p. 256).

- "KEEP IT VIVID: Speech that is vivid contains figurative language, which enables listeners to picture the speaker's meaning, and a sound and rhythm that allows them both to sense the speaker's intensity and more fully internalize the impact of the speaker's words. ... Use figures of speech. ...Use sound and rhythm" (pp. 259-262).

C. Hamilton - Successful Public Speaking

Hamilton (1996) tried to help student-speakers in selecting language for their speeches with the following suggestions:

- "SIMPLE LANGUAGE: The better speakers use simple language. Rarely are listeners impressed by speakers who use long, complicated, or technical words or who sprinkle each sentence with jargon" (p. 418).

- "SPECIFIC LANGUAGE: Just because language is simple doesn't mean that it can't be highly specific. ... Avoid ambiguous words. ... Avoid euphemisms" (pp. 419-420).

- "VIVID LANGUAGE: In addition to simple, yet specific words, effective speakers also use vivid words. For the most impact use the active rather than the passive voice. Vivid speakers avoid using vague references ..., they use a variety of interesting supporting materials, and they speak directly to their listeners as though they were having a private, personal conversation with them" (p. 420).

- "FORCEFUL LANGUAGE: ... the words you use in a speech can carry varying degrees of force or strength. Forceful language is especially important in persuasion -- it adds to the audience's confidence in the speaker" (p. 421).

J. Sprague and D. Stuart - The Speaker's Handbook

Sprague and Stuart (1996), in their handbook for public speaking, offered the following suggestions for selecting language of a speech:

- "BE PRECISE: To combat fuzzy and ambiguous communication, you need to seek out the word that means precisely what you wish to convey and use in a structure that illuminates, not obscures, its meaning" (p. 231).

- "USE SPECIFIC AND CONCRETE LANGUAGE: The more specific and concrete your words, the less is left to your listeners imaginations" (p. 232).

- "BE ECONOMICAL IN YOUR LANGUAGE: In the interest of clarity, you should express yourself with the fewest. Most straightforward words that still effectively convey your meaning" (p. 233).

- "USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE: There is no standard style to use in speaking. ... You must, in light of audience analysis, make decisions about the degree of formality, which part of your personality to project linguistically, and how deeply you descend into specialized language. ... Suite the formality of your language to the occasion. ... Be judicious in your use of jargon or slang. ... Avoid substandard usage. ... Use language that is respectful and inclusive" (pp. 235-238).

- "USE VIVID, VARIED LANGUAGE: Keep your listeners attentive and interested by avoiding dull, stale, and predictable language.

... Employ imagery. ... Use stylistic devices. ... use fresh language. ... Vary the rhythm of your sentences". (pp. 239-243).

- "SYNCHRONIZE YOUR LANGUAGE WITH THAT OF YOUR LISTENERS: Language is not the sole possession of speakers. Our words are shared with our listeners, drawn from a common pool of possible utterances. ... When choosing from many possible ways to talk about a topic, the most effective way will be the one that overlaps and resonates with your listeners. ... Synchronizing your language with you audience involves close audience analysis" (p. 244).

M. Osborn and S. Osborn - <u>Public Speaking</u>

Osborn and Osborn (1997) wrote the following in explaining to student-readers how to use language in a public speech:

- "CLARITY: Clarity comes first on our list for good reason: unless you are clear, your speech will fail from the outset. This may seem obvious, but it is often ignored! ... One way to achieve clarity is through amplification, in which you rephrase ideas to emphasize or clarify them" (pp. 330-331).

- "COLOR: Color refers to the emotional intensity of vividness of language. Colorful words are more memorable because they stand out in our minds. Those who use them are also remembered. ... Your ethos will rise as your listeners assign you high marks for competence and attractiveness" (p. 332).

- "CONCRETENESS: It is virtually impossible to discuss anything of significance without using some abstract words. However, if the language in your speech is overly abstract, listeners may lose interest" (p. 333).

- "CONCRETENESS: Nothing can damage your ethos more quickly than a glaring misuse of language. Mistakes in grammar or word selection can be disastrous because most audiences connect such errors with incompetence" (p. 333).

- "CONCISENESS: In discussing clarity we talked about the importance of amplification in speeches. Although it may seem contradictory, you must also be concise, even when you are amplifying your ideas. ... To achieve conciseness, work for simple, direct expression. ... You can also be concise by using comparisons that reduce complex issues to the essentials. ... The goal of conciseness encourages the use of maxims, those wise but compact sayings that summarize the beliefs of a people" (pp. 334-335).

- "CULTURAL SENSITIVITY: Respect for the power of words reveals how language can lift and unite or wound and hurt different members of your audience. This respect develops into cultural sensitivity. A lack of cultural sensitivity almost always has negative consequences" (pp. 335-336).

D. O'Hair, G. Friedrich, J. Wiemann, & M. Wiemann - Competent Communication

O'Hair, et al. (1997) focused on word choices that create "special problems for listeners" (p. 178). Interestingly, their advice on word choice is included in their chapter on listening. They offered the following insights:

- "Obviously, some words are more easily comprehended than others, and some are more easily distracting than others" (p. 178).

- "Words that are perceived as vulgar or profane can distract listeners. Such words can alienate people who would otherwise be interested in what is being said" (p. 179).

- "Pointed words or phrases can also distract listeners. These are word choices that a speaker uses to command, instruct, intimidate, or criticize a listener" (p. 179).

B. Gronbeck, R. McKerrow, D. Ehninger, & A. Monroe - Principles and Types of Speech Communication

Gronbeck, et al. (1997) offered the following to students preparing their speeches regarding language usage:

- "Before you can think strategically about language, you must be able to use in understandable ways" (p. 256).

- "ACCURACY: Careful word choice is an essential ingredient to effectively transmitting your meaning to an audience. ... To

avoid vagueness, choose words that express the exact shade of meaning you wish to communicate" (p. 257).

- "SIMPLICITY: 'Speak,' Lincoln said, 'so that the most lowly can understand you, and the rest will have no difficulty.' ... Don't use a longer or less familiar word when a simple one is just as clear. ... Simplicity doesn't mean simplistic; never talk down to your audience. Just remember that short, direct words convey precise, concrete meanings" (p. 257).

- "COHERENCE: In order to be understood, oral communication requires coherence, or the logical connection of ideas. To achieve coherence, you must use signposts, or words of phrases such as first, next, or as a result, to help listeners follow the movement of your ideas. ... Summaries, like signposts, provide clues to the overall speech structure. The signposts lead y our listeners step by step through the speech, signaling specific relationships between and among ideas" (pp. 258-259).

- "INTENSITY: You can communicate your feelings about ideas and objects through word choices. You can communicate your attitude toward your subject by choosing words that show how you feel. ... Communication John Waite Bowers suggested a useful rule of thumb: let your language be, roughly, one step more intense than the position or attitude held by your audience" (pp. 259-260).

- "APPROPRIATENESS: Your language should be appropriate in the speech topic and situation. ... Suit your language to the

tone of the occasion. Make sure that your language is appropriate to your audience" (pp. 260-261).

Conclusion

This manuscript is a first step in identifying how authors of textbooks for the basic communication course write about oral fluency through discussions on language usage. There are common themes suggested in most all of the texts surveyed. Among these themes are:

- be concrete
- be concise
- be appropriate
- be simple
- be vivid
- avoid profanity

The focus of this discussion is not to criticize or point fingers at the authors' efforts to help students in selecting language to use in their communication. The purpose was to use their suggestions as a spring board for additional discussion of language usage in our basic course textbooks.

I believe that this continued discussion of language usage needs to teach students language skills appropriate to be full participants in our democracy. In other words, students in our basic courses need to learn proper oral grammar and how to use an "educated" vocabulary.

It seems to me that we allow students in their communication assignments get away with too many disfluencies, gaffs in oral grammar, poor word choice, and more all in the spirit of helping the students "feel good about themselves." in my opinion, we are doing our students a disservice. As oral communication educators we need to hold students to a higher standard of oral communication competence -- higher than their high school speech teacher, higher than their parents, higher than their friends, higher than other teachers, etc. We work with college students -- lets treat them like we have college-level expectations.

We need an increased discipline-wide emphasis on oral communication fluency. Our texts need to incorporate standards of oral grammar -- perhaps borrowing from our brethren in English. We need increased emphasis on vocabulary. I never thought I'd find myself disagreeing with Abraham Lincoln, but we do not need to teach students to use language for the "lowest among us in the audience" so the other listeners won't struggle. Educated participants in our democracy need to use language that challenges the "lowest among us in the audience" and meets the expectations of other educated participants.

If we continue to water-down the expectations of language usage and accept, in many instances, mediocrity, we are doing our students a disservice not to mention continuing damage to the image of our discipline in the community of ***higher education***.

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